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ABSTRACT

This paper poses three questions about early symbolic or pretend play. (1) How does the child's play differ when the child is alone or with his mother? (2) How does the mother influence her child's play? (3) What are the long-term consequences of joint mother-child play? A study conducted with 32 mother-child pairs equally divided by sex of child and distributed across 4 age groups, including 15-, 18-, 24-, and 30-month-old children, involved videotaped solitary and joint play sessions. Play behavior was coded using a nine-point scale with three levels of non-pretend play and six levels of pretend play. Generally, joint play was found to be more sophisticated than solitary play. To a great extent, mothers prompted or directed their children's pretend play. Mothers made numerous suggestions, often demonstrated how real actions are performed, and corrected incorrect performance. Age differences were associated with differences in the type of corrections given to children. Younger children's execution of actions and object substitutions were corrected and older children's play "scripts" were corrected. Mothers' corrections frequently extended or elaborated on children's play, adding detail and drama, and served several functions, while providing structure for interaction and support for children's efforts. Data demonstrated the plausibility of the hypothesis that joint play is an important developmental force. (RH)

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TEA FOR TWO:
JOINT MOTHER-CHILD SYMBOLIC PLAY

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Running Head: JOINT PLAY

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Since this paper will be concerned to a certain extent with tea parties, we might start by remembering the most famous tea party of all--the "Mad Tea-Party" that Alice attended with the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, and the Dormouse.

> "Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone. Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. "I don't see any wine," she remarked. There isn't any," said the March Hare. "Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," said Alice angrily. ...

Alice felt, as Lewis Carroll tells us, "dreadfully puzzled" by this bizarre tea party and by the eccentric behavior of her hosts.

In the research that will be presented here, mother-child tea parties were a very common event. At these parties, mothers often engaged in March Hare-ish behavior: They poured imaginary tea from an empty teapot, offered the child an empty cup to drink from, warned him not to spill the non-existent liquid, and admonished him to blow on it to cool it.

For the most part, our one- and two-year-old subjects were not "dreadfully puzzled" as Alice was. They seemed to regard their mothers' antics as reasonably normal maternal behavior and, as we shall see, they attempted to emulate it. We shall also see that the children were occasionally quite bewildered by what their mothers did. We not mean to equate mothers with Mad Hatters and March Hares; but we do want to suggest that young children sometimes understand less about their own and their partner's play than is commonly assumed.

In this paper, we will be asking three questions about early symbolic or pretend play. (1) How does the child's play differ when alone versus with his mother? To examine this question, we observed young children's solitary play and their joint play with their mothers; and we will describe some differences we found. (2) How does the mother influence her child's play? What is the extent and nature of her contribution to joint play with her child? The major part of this paper will concern the mother's behavior in the joint play sessions. (3) What are the long-term consequences of joint mother-child play? Does joint play with the mother influence the development of representational or symbolic skills? We cannot answer this third question, but will offer some speculations based on our data.

The theoretical base for our research is Vygotsky's emphasis on the social context of cognitive development. Vygotsky believed that all important cognitive developmental milestones appear first on the interpersonal plane and only later internally or intrapersonally. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is the difference between what the child can do on his own and what he can do in collaboration with someone more competent than himself. This zone of extended competence exists because the more capable partner provides "scaffolding," support that assists the novice to perform at a higher level. Applying this concept to pretend play, one would expect that the child should play in a more sophisticated way in joint play with his mother than he does when playing alone. The child's superior performance in collaborative

play should be related to the mother's structuring or scaffolding of his play. This emphasis is quite different from the most influential theory of symbolic play--that of Piaget. Piaget was interested in pretend play primarily as a reflection of the young child's developing representational and symbolic capabilities. Symbolic development was believed to result from the child's interactions with objects and events, but not particularly from the child's interactions with other people.

Our study was conducted with 32 pairs of mothers and children. There were four boys and four girls in each of four age groups--15, 18, 24, and 30 months. The sample was predominantly white and middle class. The observations were conducted in a laboratory playroom, and only after the child appeared to be completely comfortable in the lab was the session begun. The play sessions were videotaped with a camera located behind a one-way mirror.

Each child participated in two 10-minute sessions--a solitary play session followed by a joint play session with the mother. At the beginning of each session, the experimenter placed a set of toys on the floor. She then left the room, and all observations were made with only the child and mother present. For the Solitary Play session, the child sat in the center of the floor with the toys; and the mother sat in an armchair several feet away, filling out a questionnaire. The mother was instructed to respond if the child sought her attention, but to avoid giving any specific suggestions to the child. For the Joint Play session, the mother

and child played together with a new set of toys. The mother was instructed to "play as though you were in your own home." Most (97%) of the mothers indicated afterwards that the joint play session had been typical of their normal interactions.

The two toy sets comprised a variety of toys that afforded a wide range of play, from manipulation (stacking rings) to symbolic play (tea set). The toy sets were counterbalanced with sessions, so that half of the children had Set A for their solitary play and Set B for the joint play session, and vice versa. A complete list of the toy sets is included in Table 1.

The first question referred to previously concerned differences between the child's play in the solitary and joint sessions. For coding play, we used a 9-point scale (adapted from the scales of McCune-Nicholich and Russell). As shown in Table 2, our scale included 3 levels of non-pretend play and six levels of pretend play. Using the videotapes, we coded all of the child's play behaviors for both the solitary and joint sessions. For the mother, we coded her play behaviors, and we also coded the level of the play suggestions she made to the child. (The play level of a suggestion was the level the child would have achieved if he had carried out the mother's suggestion.)

Generally, the children's behavior was more sophisticated when they played with their mothers. The children showed less frequent symbolic play on their own, and when they did engage in solitary pretend play, it tended to be at a lower level. On their own, they would just feed the doll over and over. With their

mothers, they would hug the doll, feed it, burp it, and put it to bed. These differences showed up in several measures, including mean level of the children's play in the two sessions, the highest play level achieved, and the diversity of pretend play.

The children's play was thus clearly more sophisticated when they played with their mothers. One clue to the reason for this is the fact that, during the joint play session, the majority of the child's play behaviors were in response to something the mother did or said.

Our second question concerned the mother's behavior in the joint play session. Given that the children's play is more sophisticated when they play with their mothers, what does the mother do to contribute to this effect? To a great extent, the mothers prompted or directed their children's pretend play. The mothers made numerous suggestions: They suggested objects to play with, and they suggested what to do with them ("Why don't you call Daddy on the phone"; "Can you give the man a ride in the bus"). Demonstrations of how to do something were also common. Often, the mothers demonstrated how real actions are performed, such as giving a baby (doll) a bottle and burping it. The mothers also showed the children how to pretend: They taught their children the conventions of pretend play. For example, one mother showed her child how to pretend to drink: "You drink like this," as she tipped her head back and made exaggerated sipping sounds. Thus, the mothers told and showed the children what to do, what to do it with, and how to do it.

Furthermore, if the child did not do it right, the mother corrected him. These maternal corrections were one aspect of our data that we were especially intrigued by. Corrections occurred for all age groups in the study, with no differences in the number of corrections as a function of age. There were, however, differences in the type of corrections received by the children in the different age groups.

One type of correction had to do with the child's execution of pretend actions, and this type was most common for the younger children (15- and 18-month-olds). Mothers corrected a child when the child's action violated some aspect of the structure of the real world action at which the child was pretending. A child who turned the teapot completely upsidedown above the cup elicited from his mother, "No, you pour from the spout." Children were told or shown not to hold the phone receiver upsidedown, and not to make vehicle sounds when activating the toy seal ("That's not a fire truck"). Also, several children were corrected for applying to themselves something the mother had suggested they do to the doll; in these cases, the child had performed the right action, but to the wrong recipient ("No, give the baby the bottle").

A second type of maternal correction involved the mother's rejection of an object substitution by the child (holding the doll's hair brush to the child's own mouth like a toothbrush). Two mothers rejected their children's use of the seashell as a cup (the children had raised the shell to their lips as though to drink from it), handing the child a cup to use instead. One of these mothers then

demonstrated the "proper" use of a seashell: She held it to her ear to listen to the sea!

Does this mean that these mothers were rejecting what is actually an advanced form of symbolic play? We think not. Object substitution corrections occurred almost exclusively for the younger two groups of children (the 15 and 18-month-olds). No child in these age groups ever performed a clear object substitution (that is, used a familiar object in place of something else). Thus, it is not clear that the children who raised the seashell to their lips knew what this object really was; it was simply a concave object that could afford drinking. Mothers of older children, who often performed object substitutions, did not reject them; rather, they enjoyed their children's substitutions and occasionally suggested ones of their own. One mother took the pole from the stacking rings set, held it above her head, and said, "An umbrella: Is it raining?" The same mother also suggested that her daughter might use the pole as a table to eat from and as a merry-go-round for the doll.

From this pattern of maternal corrections, we conclude that if a mother thinks her child's unconventional use of an object stems from ignorance, she discourages it. If she thinks the child is choosing to use a known object in an unconventional way, she encourages it.

The third category of pretend play corrections involved what we have called <u>script</u> corrections. This category occurred predominantly for the older groups of children (24- and 30-month-olds). These corrections can be characterized as prompting the

child to a more realistic and/or detailed enactment of an event. The mothers reminded the chidren of the proper sequence for the occurrence of events: Several children were told that they should have dialed the phone before speaking into it, and one child learned that burping the doll follows (rather than precedes) feeding it. Mothers were also concerned that their children treat the doll kindly ("Babies are for loving," instead of hitting) and appropriately ("Babies don't drink coffee"; "Oh, you're going to take her panties off too" with clear dispproval of this public disrobing).

Many of the mother's corrections did more than simply inform the child that he had done something inadequately or improperly. Often the mother's correction extended or elaborated on the child's play. After her son had absentmindedly put the teapot down in her lap, one mother exclaimed, "Ouch! It's hot, it's hot! You're not supposed to put it on me." Another mother whose daughter had just announced her intention to put "syrup" on her "hot dogs" very skeptically commented, "Syrup on our hot dogs?" The child immediately served up some imaginary pancakes in place of the hot dogs. These corrective comments enrich and enhance the play; they introduce additional elements of realism into it.

Verbal elaborations, other than the corrective comments just described, represent a substantial part of the mother's contribution to the joint play sessions. The mother's elborations add detail and drama to the child's play. Examples of maternal elaborations include: "My tea is too hot; I'll have to blow on it to cool it."

"Yum, yum, what good hot dogs. What a good cook you are!" "Look how nicely your baby is sleeping. She's dreaming." Maternal elaborations give the child new ideas for things to do. One mother's statement, "I think your baby just woke up," led the child to then feed the doll.

In addition to generally enlivening the joint play, maternal elaborations serve several other functions. Some provide a rationale for the child's play acts. For example, one mother commented, "Oh, okay, she might be thirsty" after her son gave a bottle to the doll. Other elaborations conveyed approval of the child's play behaviors. After one child kissed the doll, his mother smiled and said, "Oh, you're such a good babysitter." After being served pancakes, another mother complimented her child, "This is just delicious. You're such a good cook." Some elaborations sought to get the child to contribute to the development of the play scenario: "Does the dolly have a name" "What are you gonna serve us?" "Does the dolly like the juice?"

Another frequent type of elaborations (experiential comments) provided the child with a bridge to the real world. By far the most common was to point out the similarity between the doll and some real baby with which the child was acquainted ("Is she like Baby Eric? ... Is she sleeping like he does?) or with the child himself as a baby ("Like Mommy used to feed you," referring to giving the doll a bottle). Mothers also point out how the toys resemble the child's own toys ("She's just like the baby you have at home") or real objects ("Is this like the bus that goes by our

house"), and how the pretend play routines in which they are engaged are like events in the child's real life ("What do I do for you sometimes when you go to sleep? Do I sing you a song?").

The mother's elaborations upon the joint play enrich and expand it. They provide coherence and texture. Rather than the child solemnly enacting pouring from a teapot and drinking from a cup, as happens in the solitary play sessions, the mother and child are engaged in an elaborate dramatization of an idealized tea party complete with "hot" tea, serving rituals, and proper etiquette.

Mothers in our sample provided a number of other forms of support, as well. They physically facilitated the child's play: For example, mothers held the phone base so that the child could dial, they cleared a path so the child could "drive" the firetruck to a fire, they found the bottle so the child could feed the doll. Thus, the mothers often physically assisted the child in carrying out his or her idea for pretense. In addition, the mothers provided motivational force for the children's play. They made the play more fun. The level of enjoyment apparent in the child's play was markedly different in the two sessions. Children enjoyed the mother as an active play partner and as an appreciative audience for their own pretense.

To summarize what has been said so far, mothers do a host of things to support their children's pretend play. The suggestions, demonstrations, corrections, and elaborations that predominate in the mother's behavior represent clear forms of maternal scaffolding: They provide structure for the interaction and support for the

child's efforts. In Vygotsky's terms, the mother creates a zone of proximal development in joint play with her child, enabling the child to achieve much more in collaboration with her than he does alone. Indeed, given how little many children manage on their own, it is surprising to see how much they are capable of with their mother's assistance.

Not all maternal actions are perfectly aimed, of course. Occasionally, the mothers did things that their children seemed not to understand--the origin of the initial analogy between our subjects and Alice, who, as you will recall, felt "dreadfully puzzled." Our subjects were especially likely to be perplexed by their mothers' behavior when she pretended at a level a great deal higher than the child's own. The children often rejected their mother's suggestions, either indirectly by simply ignoring them or directly. The girl whose mother had suggested using the ring pole as an umbrella responded to this creative suggestion with a simple, "No!"

Our impression was that the child's rejection of a maternal suggestion often reflected confusion about the meaning of the mother's behavior. We have some data that suggest that the level of confusion experienced by the child during joint play may be, at times, surprisingly high. These data consist of occasions when the child seemed to shift suddenly from a pretense to a literal mode. An event that illustrates this phenomenon very clearly occurred during a picture-taking session in which we were having a mother and child pose so we could take slides for a talk. We had asked the

mother to reproduce for the camera an event that had actually occurred with one of our real subjects--the mother's suggestion of the ring pole as an umbrella. The mother complied with our request and held the umbrella up, saying, "Look, it's raining." She then went on to elaborate the idea for her 30-month-old son: "Hold your hands up and feel the rain," as she held her own hand out as though to feel falling rain. He obeyed her suggestion and held his hands up. What happened next is what we found so intriguing. After holding his hands up to "feel the rain," he then turned the palms of his hands to his face and inspected them, apparently checking to see if they were wet.

Other examples of this sort occurred during the joint play sessions. After the mother of a 15-month-old girl "poured" into the child's cup, the child leaned over and peered into the cup, apparently looking for the liquid. The mother then "drank" from her own cup, making sipping sounds. The child took the mother's cup from her and again peered into it. A 24-month-old boy was playing with the phone. The mother asked to "speak to Daddy." She conducted an imaginary conversation with her husband and handed the phone back to the child, saying, "He wants to talk to [you]." The child put the receiver to his ear in a "listening" posture, which he sustained for a full six seconds. The child looked as though he really expected to hear his father's voice. Another child in a similar situation actually pulled the receiver from her shoulder and stared at the earpiece. During a tea party, a 30-month-old boy dropped the sponge and knocked his cup over. His mother responded,

"Uh-oh, you spilled your tea. You better wipe it up." The child picked up the sponge and looked all around the area around the cup, asking, "Where?" He appeared to be searching for the spilled tea. This child did not look like he was pretending to look for imaginary spilled tea, and, failing to find any real tea, he did not pretend to clean up imaginary tea.

In these "reality checks," the child seems to momentarily slip out of the pretend mode for some reason. These examples of childish confusion seem to us interpretable in terms of maternal scaffolding and the zone of proximal development. Our subjects may have been operating at the maximum level of which they were capable when playing with their mothers. (The comparison of joint and solitary play supports this.) The mother has erected a scaffolding, and the child is standing on the very top of it, reaching as high as he can. But, once in a while, he slips off the scaffolding.

This is possibly an overly poetic construal of a very limited data set. These reality checks are relatively rare events; Only eight of our 32 subjects provided clear examples. (Four of the eight were 18-month-olds).

Finally, we would like to consider the third question posed at the beginning of the paper. What, if any, are the long-term consequences of joint mother-child pretend play? Our data have demonstrated the plausibility of the hypothesis that joint play is an important developmental force. The mother's organization of the interaction establishes a zone of proximal development, and the child achieves a higher level within it than he does alone.

What learning or developmental progress might occur within this zone? The mother's input to the joint play provides the child with information about the real world--about, for example, the roles people assume and the structure of common events (such as the order in which the elements of an event occur). Mothers also teach their children about pretend play itself. One thing that children learn is that pretend play is valued by adults. Children also learn the cultural conventions for representing events: They are taught our culture's play rituals for pretending to drink, for tasting and commenting upon imaginary food ("Mmm, this is so delicious"), and the appropriate sounds to make for a host of animals and vehicles.

Mothers also convey the "rules" of pretend play. Children learn something about the relation between the real world and the world of play. They are taught which aspects of the structure of real events must be preserved even in play, and which can be violated. Two examples that come readily to mind are: Play can proceed in the complete absence of requisite objects or substances, but the logical or necessary order of events must be preserved (tea must be poured before it can be drunk; the doll is fed before being burped).

But does the mother's contribution to joint play advance the child's development, either of symbolic play or of more general representational skills? Our data do not provide a definitive answer, but it seems to us reasonable to think that it might. Whatever the level at which the child currently plays, the mother is likely to suggest pretend activities at a higher level. Then she

demonstrates for the child how to carry out her suggestion, physically assists him in doing it, corrects any aspects he fails to do right, and rewards him when he succeeds. It seems plausible that this extensive maternal scaffolding could enable the child to reach one step higher.

TABLE 1

Toy Sets*

Toy Set A	Toy Set B
Tea Set:	Doll
Teapot with lid	Baby Bottle
2 cups and saucer	Basket bed for Doll
Spoon	Telephone
Doll	Fire Truck
Baby Bottle	1 peg person (Fisher Pric
Rattle	Stuffed dog
Bus	Seal pull toy
2 peg people (Fisher Price)	Large sea shell (scallop)
4 wooden clothespins	Piece of felt
Small sea shell (scallop)	Stacking rings set:
Sponge (5" x 4" x 3")	Pole and 4 rings
4 wooden cylinders in graduated sizes	of graduated size

*Half the children in each age group had Set A for their Solitary-Play session and Set B for their Joint-Play session; the other half had the opposite.

Table 2

Categorization of Play Behavior*

Non-Pretend Play

Exploration: Visual examination alone (5 or more seconds) or shaking, mouthing or touching an object to the subject's body (e.g., press plate to cheek). Exploitation of manipulative features of an object (e.g., stretch phone cord, open and close doll's eyes).

Combinatorial: Nonconventional combination of objects (including the subject's body (e.g., place rattle in bus, hook seashell over foot).

Relational: Combination of two or more objects in a conventional manner (e.g., fit lid on teapot, place rings on stacking pole).

Pretend Play

Level 1: Abbreviated gestures that demonstrate awareness of the conventional use of replica objects but with no evidence that symbolic representation is intended (e.g., touch cup to lips without any drinking mannerisms; place receiver to ear without making any conversational sounds).

Level 2: Self-directed pretense actions that represent the subject's own activities enacted out of context (e.g., feed self with spoon while making smacking noises).

Level 3: Simple gestures directed toward a passive other (e.g., kiss or hug doll, pet stuffed dog).

Level 4: Pretense activities directed toward a play partner or replica object, including caregiving acts (e.g., burp doll, brush

mother's hair) housekeeping activities (e.g., pour from teapot, wipe up the floor with a sponge), phone conversations, and driving cars or trucks with appropriate vehicular noises, also coded at this level are children's requests that their mothers carry out specific pretend acts (e.g., child hands a cup of "tea" to the mother for her to "drink").

Level 5a: Animation of toys: Dolls and stuffed animals are animated and caused to either "speak" or to move or both (e.g., doll "talks" on the phone; dog "jumps" into the air and says "woof").

Level 5b: One object is designated as a substitute for another, different object by both verbalizations and appropriate actions (e.g., sponge is labelled as a "stove" and a teapot is placed on it; a seashell is placed on a doll's head and is labelled as a "hat").

Level 6: An imaginary prop, not suggested or supported by the objects in the play set, is incorporated into the pretend play scenario (e.g., bath is taken in an imaginary bathtub; tea is offered to an absent father; sugar is scooped from an imaginary sugar bowl).

*These categories were used to code both the child's and the mother's play acts, as well as the mother's suggestions and demonstrations of play behaviors.